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Sustainable Religious Tourism Commandments, Obstacles & Challenges 26th-28th October 2012 (Lecce-Tricase-Italy)

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From 26 to 28 October 2012 the Second International Congress on Religious Tourism, organised by the geographer Anna Trono and the chair of Economic and Political Geography of the Department of Cultural Heritage of the University of Salento, was held in Lecce. The event benefited from the collaboration of many academies and cultural associations including the University of Haifa, the Ludwig-Maximilians University of Munich, the Association for Tourism and Leisure Education (ATLAS), the Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna, the University of Waikato (New Zealand), the Via Francigena Pugliese Association and the Academy of Fine Arts of Lecce.

In addition to the members of the Scientific Committee, famous for their international studies, the participants, teachers and scholars, came from many institutions of Albania, Belgium, France, Georgia, Greece, India, Iran, Portugal, United States, Israel and other universities.

The presence of experts from so many far and different geographical areas, has contributed to create a better view, on global scale, of the problems and issues related to religious tourism, which is already rooted, or developing, in these places.

Religious tourism is a phenomenon of great importance nowadays and, for this reason, needs to be studied and valued on the basis of a sustainable approach.

The task of the Congress was precisely to identify both its strengths and its challenges, through a wide comparison and an international debate.

As it has been well emphasized in the introduction, it is a reality of great importance for the countries involved, because it regards not only the destinations of worshipping previously chosen, but it interacts with cultural

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tourism, taking into consideration events, typical food, ceremonies, rituals and the historical and artistic heritage that a traveler meets on his journey.

And, last but not least, this kind of tourism is also associated with the love for the setting, because tourists are urged to visit places that correspond to their religious research of meaning and peace, and the surroundings takes on a deep significance.

So, it is clear that religious tourism has, at the same time, a strong impact in the area where it takes place, from economic, cultural, environmental, social and anthropological points of view.

The discussions went on for several days and took into consideration this network of relationships, demonstrating that spirit, well-being and nature are the main reasons that guide the path of the pilgrim tourist.

Data, statistical series, specific cases, studies and comparisons were presented to analyze these connections defined, because of their variety and dynamism, "multidimensional".

Particular attention has been given to the environmental sustainability of religious tourism, a theme that has been developed in a number of interventions that dealt with the study of places of worship such as Lithuania, Albania, Iran and the island of Malta.

The respect of the environment, hosting these destinations, and the needs of the pilgrims and of the local population, are the factors of a delicate balance that must be maintained, because it is essential.

If each of these elements is well respected, as emerged, they let the territory and its residents develop economic activities of welcome, hospitality and sales of local products and "souvenirs". The pilgrim, at the same time, may enjoy the hospitality and the comforts, making new friends and interacting with different realities.

During the analysis it was, however, pointed out that it has not always been possible, and it is still difficult, to offer the visitors free access to places of worship, because of dictatorial regimes, geo-political issues and the difficult coexistence of different faiths in the same land.

These are complex problems that affect the religious and political field, particularly regarding the populations who live situations of distress and conflict. They have a reflection in the touristic religious experience, too, and not only.

The socio-economic effects were, in turn, considered by examining the effects that the flows of tourists towards churches and cathedrals and/or crowded religious festivities have in the area.

The data demonstrate that such movements of travelers are able to revitalize the economy and should be encouraged, in the due measures, to enhance the artistic and historical heritage, as well as less known but still fascinating and worth visiting realities.

This, from a practical point of view, would contribute to de-seasonalize the flow of incoming, re-outlining the identity of places at the same time.

Other contributions have emphasized the importance and the need of an effective and active collaboration between the Government and the Church, for the promotion and development of religious tourism.

The strategies adopted in Germany by the ecclesiastical authorities have promoted self-financing activities, such as the payment of an entrance fee to visit specific areas of the buildings, which sometimes host art exhibitions.

In other realities, such as Italy instead, these contributions are not commonly in use, because they are considered disrespectful of the place of worship.

The means implemented by local authorities in Lourdes and San Giovanni Rotondo, in fact, as shown by recent studies presented at the Congress, have contributed to create a kind of mass phenomenon, where religious tourists look less and less different from those who are not motivated by a spiritual intent.

The series of conferences have also been an opportunity to highlight the potentialities of new methods of investigation, due to new technologies. They now coexist with more traditional ones.

For example, GIS technology has been used in a study in Veneto to “describe” also secondary religious itineraries, useful for promoting some less visited areas, still full of places of interest.

The 3D graphic has been used to re-create the various stages of development that, over the centuries, have affected the Cathedral of Bari. As recognized by many, these realistic images can provide the tourist with many explanations that could not be possible in other ways.

Moreover, in a number of studies, the data were obtained from databases that allow getting information on the expectations, preferences and needs of travelers.

Information has also been obtained on the basis of the experience of some professional tour guides, who conducted surveys among groups of pilgrims.

The comparison showed that, for a sort of custom dictated by several factors, specific routes that seem to correspond better to the expectations of the travelers, are emerging.

Also the analysis of texts and documents of the past falls into this category of studies, using methods that can be defined more 'classic'.

The guides published on the occasion of the Jubilees of the twentieth century have been examined to identify, according to the itineraries proposed to the pilgrim, the mingling of sacred and profane space, chronological and 'cairotico' time, which means dedicated to meet the divine.

Cards and texts were investigated in a diachronic perspective to reconstruct, instead, ancient pilgrimage routes, such as those related to Marian devotion, the Via Francigene, the Camino of Santiago, the cult of the Angel Michael and Our Lady of Nazaré. The documents have allowed the reconstruction of the

events and memories of these routes that are still covered every year by millions of believers and people animated by a spiritual research.

The theoretical study, in its nature more or less technological, and the study on the field, as demonstrated by a few people, must therefore be complementary to one another, to conduct more effective analysis and to correspond to reality. To this regard, during the breaks between the sessions of discussion and in the evenings, some time was dedicated to taste the typical food and wine of the Salento and to listen to Baroque, Gregorian, polyphonic and classical music.

As a frame, there were the historical and suggestive buildings of the Church of Santa Maria del Carmine, the theatre Paisello in Lecce and the Doge's Palace of Cavallino.

The Provincial Museum Sigismondo Castromediano and the palace Gallone of Tricase were the seats that hosted the speeches and discussions each day.

These buildings rich in history, art and culture resulted in perfect harmony with the themes of tradition, religion, conservation, promotion and enhancement of the tangible and intangible heritage, that people were facing.

The Salento has proved a particularly suitable location to host an international conference on the problems, opportunities, relationships and connections of religious tourism with the territory.

The Region over the centuries has been a place of transit for pilgrims going to the East, a corridor of communication for merchants and travellers, combining splendid monuments, stunning landscapes, important religious festivities and a lot of places of worship.

All these elements, as mentioned and demonstrated during the conference, are the basis of today's religious tourism, which should continue to be studied because of its relevance, importance and complexity.

More detailed information about the content of the sessions, can be found by visiting the site

<http://www.sustainablereligious tourism.com/en/>